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13. ABSTRACT (Maximum 200 words) The purpose of this effort was to study visual, focal selective attention and its implementation in the primate visual system from a computational point of view. It is know that at the neuronal level, two cortical pathways exists that are responsible for mediating attention: the where pathway that selects interesting or conspicuous locations and the what pathway that identifies and recognizes objects. In the effort, it was shown how neuronal networks based on those found in the cerebral cortex can implemented these pathways using real images. In particular, the use of a saliency map, that encodes how "interesting" or "salient" locations are in the visual field (rather than what features are present at these locations) represents a powerful strategy to aid visual search. These algorithms are being ported onto Pentium-based machines for various machine-vision applications.					
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Final Report

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Towards a Neurobiological Theory of Visual Attention

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Technical Progress

The purpose of this effort was to study visual, focal selective attention and its implementation in the primate visual system from a computational point of view. It is known that at the neuronal level, two cortical pathways exist that are responsible for mediating attention: the *where* pathway that selects interesting or conspicuous locations and the *what* pathway that identifies and recognizes objects. In the effort, it was shown how neuronal networks based on those found in the cerebral cortex can implement these pathways using real images. In particular, the use of a *saliency map*, that encodes how "interesting" or "salient" locations are in the visual field (rather than what features are present at these locations) represents a powerful strategy to aid visual search. These algorithms are being ported onto Pentium-based machines for various machine-vision applications.

Introduction

The computations of early vision are essentially parallel operations, *i.e.*, they are applied in parallel to all parts of the visual field. This high degree of parallelism cannot be sustained in intermediate and higher vision because of the astronomical number of different possible combination of features. Therefore, it becomes necessary to select only a part of the instantaneous sensory input for more detailed processing and to discard the rest. This is the mechanism of visual selective attention which we set out to study by computational methods.

Primate vision is organized along two major anatomical pathways. One of them is concerned mainly with *object recognition*. For this reason, it has been called the *What* pathway; for anatomical reasons, it is also known as the ventral, or occipito-temporal, pathway. The principal task of the other major pathway is the determination of the *location* of objects and therefore it is called the *Where* pathway or, again for anatomical reasons, the dorsal, or occipito-parietal, pathway.

Most of our work during the first period of the grant period was devoted to the development of model for the implementation of the *What* pathway. The underlying mechanism is "temporal tagging:" it is assumed that the attended region of the visual field is distinguished from the unattended parts by the temporal fine-structure of the neuronal spike trains. We have shown that temporal tagging can be achieved by introducing oscillations (Niebur, Koch and Rosin, 1993) or moderate levels of correlation among groups of cells (Niebur and Koch, 1994) and that the tag thus generated may be available at all stages of the perceptual hierarchy.

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activity, we have suggested a simple mechanism, namely a very brief common input to all cells which respond to attended stimuli. Such (excitatory) input will increase the propensity of postsynaptic cells to fire for a very short time after receiving this input, and thereby increase the correlation between spike trains without necessarily increasing the average firing rate.

Over the last year, we have developed a model of the control system which generates such modulating input. We have shown that it is possible to construct an integrated system of attentional control based on neuronally plausible elements and which is compatible with the anatomy and physiology of the primate visual system. The system scans a visual scene and identifies its most salient parts.

We have also pursued the question of the neuronal implementation of *feature-based* attention. We showed (Usher and Niebur, 1995) that the dynamical response of cortical IT neurons in a delayed-match-to-sample task can be understood as an attentional modulation which is mediated by a simple feedback mechanism involving prefrontal cortex. This study complements our work on location-based attention and generalizes our model to incorporate those attentional phenomena which do not depend on the activity in a saliency map.

Finally, in collaboration with Dr. Francis Crick at the Salk Institute we have continued to pursue the question of the neuronal correlate of awareness (Crick and Koch, 1995). More specifically, in what neurons in what brain areas does attention and the content of visual awareness arise. We conclude that neurons that mediate visual awareness must directly project to the planning stages of the brain, that is to pre-frontal cortical areas. We therefore conclude that the firing of neurons in primary visual cortex, while necessary for most of conscious vision, do not directly cause visual awareness. This proposal has caused a lot of controversy, with a number of laboratories actively working on evaluating its experimental status. Indeed, one such psychophysical study, originating in our laboratory, has just appeared in *Nature* (Kolb and Braun, 1995).

Because our model of the dorsal *What* pathway has interesting implications for the manner in which computer-vision systems allocate their computational resources (see also our "Future outlook" section), we will describe it in more detail.

A Simple Model of The Dorsal Pathway

Overall Structure

Figure~1 shows an overview of the model *Where* pathway. Input is provided in the form of digitized images from an NTSC camera which is then analyzed in various feature maps. These maps are organized around the known operations in early visual cortices. They are implemented at

different spatial scales, and each feature is computed in a center-surround structure akin to visual receptive fields (Abelson *et al.*, 1984). The features implemented so far are the three principal components of primate color vision (intensity, red-green, blue-yellow), four orientations, and temporal change.

Target Selection and the Saliency Map

The task of the saliency map is the computation of the salience at every location in the visual field and the subsequent selection of the most salient areas or objects. At any time, only one such area is selected. The feature maps provide current input to the saliency map. The output of the saliency map consists of a spike train from neurons corresponding to this selected area in the topographic map which project to the ventral ("What") pathway. By this mechanism, they are "tagged" by modulating the temporal structure of the neuronal signals corresponding to attended stimuli.

Once all relevant features have been computed in the various feature maps, they have to be combined to yield the salience, *i.e.* a scalar quantity. In our model, we solve this task by simply adding the activities in the different feature maps (reduced to the size of the saliency map using a Gaussian pyramid).

At any given time, the maximum of this map is therefore the most salient stimulus. As a consequence, this is the stimulus to which the focus of attention should be directed next to allow more detailed inspection by the more powerful "higher" process which are not available to the massively parallel feature maps. This maximum is selected by application of a winner-take-all mechanism.

For a static image, the system would so far attend continuously the most conspicuous stimulus. This is neither observed in biological vision nor desirable from a functional point of view; instead, after inspection of any point, there is usually no reason to dwell on it any longer and the next-most salient point should be attended.

We achieve this behavior by introducing feedback from the winner-take-all array. When a spike occurs in the WTA network, the integrators in the saliency map receive additional input with the spatial structure of an inverted Mexican hat, *ie.* a difference of *i.e.* The (inhibitory) center is at the location of the winner which becomes thus inhibited in the saliency map and, consequently, attention switches to the next-most conspicuous location. At the same time, the system avoids to return to the same location it has just visited, a phenomenon which is well-known in psychophysics under the term "inhibition of return."

Simulation Results

We have studied the system with inputs constructed analogously to typical visual psychophysical stimuli. For instance, bright spots in dark backgrounds (or dark spots in bright backgrounds) are reliably detected, and the focus of attention immediately jumps to such stimuli. If there is more than one such stimulus, the system scans them one-by-one, in the order of decreasing contrast from the background. The same is true for stimuli which have a color or orientation different from that of the background, or for moving stimuli in front of a static background. In all cases, the elements can have different sizes (*i.e.* different spatial dimensions). The system was also applied to images of natural and artificial environments (recorded with a commercial NTSC camcorder) and was in general successful in selecting the most salient portions of the scenes (see Fig.~2).

Space limitations prevent a detailed presentation of these results in this report. Some of the results have been published already (Niebur and Koch, 1995) others are contained in a forthcoming publication.

Conclusion And Outlook

We present in this final technical report a prototype for an integrated system mimicking the control of visual selective attention. Our model is compatible with the known anatomy and physiology of the primate visual system, and its different parts communicate by signals which are neurally plausible. The model identifies the most salient points in a visual scenes one-by-one and scans the scene autonomously in the order of decreasing saliency. This allows the control of a subsequently activated processor which is specialized for detailed object recognition. At present, saliency is determined by combining the input from a set of feature maps with fixed weights. In future work, we will generalize our approach by introducing plasticity in these weights and thus adapting the system to the task at hand.

Partially funded by a Multidisciplinary Research Program (MURI) via the Office of Naval Research (ONR), we are now porting this suite of programs onto pentium-based machines for studying machine vision application. In particular, we are focusing on the problem of very rapid identification of particular features (e.g. faces or weapons) in video sequences via a saliency-map based procedure. This involves the need to learn how the various features map can be mapped onto the saliency map (in a supervised or unsupervised manner) to assure optimal detection.

Figure 1: Overview of the model *Where* pathway. Features are computed as center-surround differences at 4 different spatial scales (only 3 feature maps shown). They are combined and integrated in the saliency map ("SM") which provides input to an array of integrate-and-fire neurons with global inhibition. This array ("WTA") has the functionality of a winner-take-all network and provides the output to the ventral pathway ("V2") as well as feedback to the saliency map (bold arrow).

Figure 2: Example of the performance of the attentional control system. Input to the system is a picture of the Caltech bookstore, here reproduced in gray-scale. Top left: The most salient point in the image is a red banner on the wall of the bookstore (in the center of the image). Therefore, this becomes the location where the focus of attention is directed to first (shown as white square). Top left, top right, bottom left: Trajectory of the focus of attention, shown as dark line, at the simulated times listed above the respective images. The focus of attention shifts about every 35 msec to the next-most salient location. Note that at t=280 msec (top right), the continuously high input leads to a re-focusing on the location attended first (at t=140 msec). However, the system does not enter in a loop as is seen at t=315 msec (bottom left). Bottom right: After t=540 msec, the system has visited 11 locations (shown by white squares; one location visited twice) and scanned a significant portion of the image. Bottom center: Instantaneous activity in the saliency map at the times corresponding to the images pointed to by the arrows. Note the dark "blobs" caused by the inhibitory feedback at the just-visited location. The center-bottom map (without arrow) shows the input to the saliency map, *i.e.* the sum of all feature maps.

Personnel

Number of researchers working on this project:

Christof Koch, PhD, Professor

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Mike Harville, CNS graduate student

Jiajun Wei, Physics Graduate Student

Chris Waite, Undergraduate student

Publications

All of the following publications result from the effort summarized above and explicitly acknowledge the support of the Air Force Office of Scientific Research.

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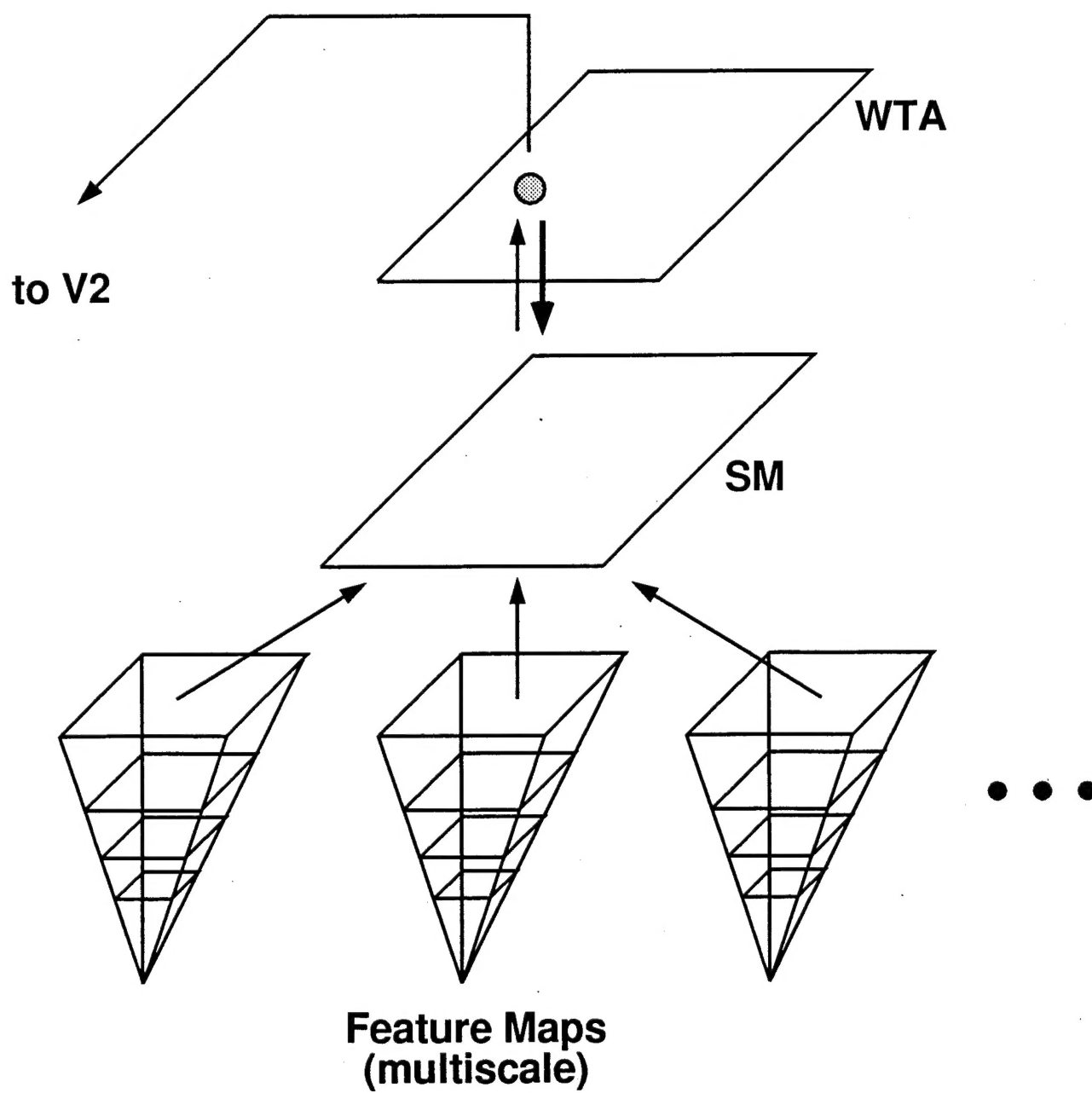
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400ms Of Attention

